

DOE says judge's waste ruling could slow Hanford tank cleanup

A decision by a federal judge in Boise on July 3 could put a crimp into Department of Energy plans for accelerating the cleanup of radioactive tank waste at Hanford and other DOE sites. U.S. District Court Judge Lynn Winmill ruled that DOE proposals for reclassifying some waste would violate provisions of the 1982 Nuclear Waste Policy Act.

The Natural Resources Defense Council, the Snake River Alliance, the Yakama Indian Nation and the Shoshone-Bannock tribe filed the suit to force DOE to stick with previous cleanup plans, rather than reclassifying some of its tank waste to avoid permanently removing it. DOE has not issued a formal plan for reclassification, but has considered leaving a residue of waste in the tanks that could be grouted and safely left in place. Grouting would allow the material to be reclassified as low-activity waste.

"If the decision stands, it will have a tremendous impact on the taxpayers and our ability to clean up our sites sooner," said DOE Headquarters spokesman Joe Davis. "We are especially disappointed in the court's ruling, given the fact that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, an agency that deals with nuclear waste as well, agreed with our position."

Davis said the department has not decided whether to appeal the ruling, which could also affect cleanup operations at the Idaho National Environmental and Engineering Laboratory and the Savannah River Site in South Carolina. More than half of the nation's high-level radioactive waste is here at Hanford.

Hanford has some 53 million gallons of tank waste in 177 underground tanks. Most of it is scheduled for vitrification in the Waste Treatment Plant, now under construction, or will be treated using one of the supplemental treatment technologies being considered.■